

United States Senate  
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 4, 2008

The Honorable Robert Gates  
Secretary of Defense  
1000 Defense Pentagon  
Washington DC 20301

Dear Secretary Gates:

America's dispersed, alert Minuteman III Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) force is a critical element of the nuclear triad and represents our most responsive, stabilizing, and cost-effective strategic force. As members of the Senate ICBM Coalition, we write to share some thoughts regarding the stewardship of our strategic forces, specifically the ICBM force.

Several important ICBM-related programmatic and policy changes have occurred in recent years. You will recall that the National Defense Authorization Act of 2007 required that the Minuteman III ICBM weapon system now perform its deterrent mission through 2030. While the ongoing modernization programs were originally only planned to extend Minuteman's service life through 2020, this change in policy and additional funds provided by Congress will ensure that the entire 450-missile deployed force will be able to meet the 2030 objective. We strongly support this life extension and will continue to remain active to ensure that the Department's budgets and policies remain consistent with the 2030 target.

Like any weapon system, the Minuteman system requires attention to aging components and infrastructure investment independent of the current modernization efforts. Historically, the Department has invested approximately \$200 million per year for missile, ground system, and critical support equipment updates in addition to operations and maintenance. Since the surety and readiness of the weapon system are paramount to our national defense, proper planning, programming, investment and support of future sustainment and modernization programs are absolutely critical.

National attention has rightly been drawn to the vital question of maintaining high levels of nuclear surety and security. We appreciate your efforts in response to recent incidents involving the mishandling of nuclear weapons and strongly agree with the need for a renewed leadership commitment to the deterrence mission and the surety of nuclear weapons. We believe that your top priority in this area should be ensuring that the personnel operating, maintaining and securing our nuclear assets are fully trained and qualified, with the deep knowledge and high experience level needed to responsibly handle the most dangerous weapons.

Our investigation of these issues identified investments that could enhance the security of the ICBM force. In particular, we suggest that the Department quickly carry out an ICBM Cryptography Upgrade (ICU) program. This program will significantly improve the security of the U.S. nuclear arsenal by providing the ability to conduct remote code changes for ICBMs,

thereby eliminating the need to open each missile launch facility every year. The need to open each launch facility for code changes increases security forces requirements, miles driven by maintenance teams, and represents a period of increased risk to the security of the force. It is our understanding that there is currently no funding to complete the remote code change portion of the ICU program. We urge you to review the circumstances surrounding the full completion of this critical program and seek to provide required funding in the 2010 POM process.

The strategic nuclear forces that deterred Soviet aggression and kept the limited conflicts of the Cold War era from escalating to global annihilation continue to play a critical role in deterring aggression and dissuading new near-peer competitors. At its present size, our ICBM force represents a nearly insurmountable hedge against strategic surprise. That force, because of its broad dispersion and high survivability, is nearly impossible to preempt or disarm. With most missiles armed with only a single warhead, the ICBM force additionally offers a high level of crisis stability. This capability also helps to reduce the risk of regional arms races that could encourage friends and allies to develop their own nuclear capabilities.

As our nation proceeds to analyze and make decisions on future strategic posture and U.S nuclear policy, we believe that ICBMs will continue to be the most responsive and stabilizing element of the nuclear triad. Minuteman III is a robust, cost-effective and highly capable system. With your continued support, we believe it will continue to play a vital role in our Nation's security through 2030.

Sincerely,



KENT CONRAD



MAX BAUCUS



BYRON DORGAN



ORRIN HATCH



JOHN BARRASSO




MICHAEL ENZI



KEN SALAZAR



ROBERT BENNETT



JON TESTER



WAYNE ALLARD